Institutional Transpositions

Bergs, S.

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Review

Institutional Transpositions: Two Music Exhibitions and the Politics of Attention

Steyn Bergs

It is not that we never had music or sound-based work in our museums and art galleries before. Although the following account brackets, for the sake of expediency, the entire history of music's prior excursions into institutions of visual art as well as music's entanglements with the visual arts more generally, the claim here is not that there is anything particularly new about music moving into art spaces. Nor is the present text animated by the desire, often typical of art criticism, to detect, articulate, and possibly evaluate a certain tendency or artistic 'trend'. Rather, the point of this text is to bring into a constellation two exhibitions to which music was crucial, and which experimented in different ways with inserting music into institutional contexts commonly reserved for contemporary visual art. In doing so, it will be argued that for all their apparent differences, these two exhibitions—*Kunsthalle for Music* at Witte de With in Rotterdam and *w serves imperialism* at W139, Amsterdam—shared certain structural features and underlying concerns, and thus resonate with one another. More specifically, the emphasis will be on how both exhibitions experimented with the duration of reception, with the question of who exerts control over this duration, and finally with attention and distraction. More specifically still, these exhibitions' organization of temporality and experience will be read against the backdrop of our 21st-century attention economy, in which content becomes abundant and ubiquitous, and attention becomes a scarce commodity as a result. Sensing an urgency therein, the parallel reading of these two exhibitions of

music—the time-based art par excellence—will illuminate the relations between art institutions and the temporal economies of exhibitions on the one hand, and the attention economy on the other.

Kunsthalle for Music

"Music is not necessarily what you think it is," proclaims the opening of a manifesto penned by Ari Benjamin Meyers, artistic director of *Kunsthalle for Music*, initiated by Meyers himself in collaboration with the Witte de With centre for contemporary art in Rotterdam and the Hong Kong-based organization Spring Workshop. The project's stated aim, then, was to explore and push the boundaries of what we commonly understand music to be. Much like Meyers' manifesto, the exhibition that took place in Witte de With from January 28 until March 3, 2018, revealed a desire to break away from certain conventions that appear as near-inextricable from dominant tendencies in Western music. Such conventions include the ritual character of the concert or musical performance; the separation, in the social situation of the performance, between an audience and a group of specialized performers or interpreters; the notion that an interpretation or recording is supposed to be faithful not only to the musical score but also to certain conceptions of what is supposedly essential in a specific piece or a specific genre of music. *Kunsthalle for Music* wanted to (re-) ground music in the everyday, as an embodied experience and lived practice.

As this description reveals, the specter of the avant-garde loomed large over the project—with the (neo-)avant-garde's musical experimentations, and particularly those of post-Cagean Fluxus, serving as the most apparent point of reference for the project.[1] This was furthermore underscored by the articulation of the *Kunsthalle's* founding principles in a manifesto—an avant-garde form *par excellence.* In Peter Bürger's influential theorization, the historical avant-garde aspired to achieve a fusion of art (or music) and life, a fusion that would ultimately amount to the sublation of art as an institution.[2] According to Bürger's account, the crux of the historical avant-gardes was essentially a radical de-institutionalization of art.[3] The historical avant-gardes considered the institution of art a mere by-product of bourgeois ideology, and saw art's institutions as practico-inert even in respect to this already regressive ideology. The *Kunsthalle for Music*'s reminiscences of the avant-garde, then, rendered all the more conspicuous the fact that the project proposed not such a de-institutionalization, but rather a transposition of music to the institutional contexts and *dispositifs* specific to contemporary visual art—specifically, the context of the *Kunsthalle*, a typically post-war institutional space that is invested in the mounting of temporary exhibitions and does not collect or preserve any works of art.[4]

During the course of the exhibition at Witte de With—for which the entire art centre was in fact temporarily renamed the *Kunsthalle for Music*—four musical live performances took place every week. The repertoire consisted of music and of other pieces "based on music"—mostly performance works with some musical component to them. It included pieces by composers such as Charles Ives, but also by characters we mostly associate with the visual arts, from Marcel Duchamp via John Baldessari to Laure Prouvost. A small number of pieces were newly commissioned; works by Jonathan Bepler, Libia Castro & Ólafur Ólafsson, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, and The Residents. The repertoire was interpreted by the *Kunsthalle for Music Ensemble*, which was formed especially for the occasion of the exhibition and consisted of eight musicians and performers with different disciplinary backgrounds, interests, and fields of expertise. The selection and order of the pieces executed by the ensemble was different each time; each visit and each performance were therefore unique. It is not an exaggeration to state that attending the *Kunsthalle for Music* differed radically from the standard concert experience—and that includes performances of experimental music and avant-garde pieces. Witte de With's two-storey exhibition space was used in its entirety; with the members of the ensemble scattering through the rooms, congregating for a certain piece, then scattering again. More than anything, the musical experience in the *Kunsthalle* was designed to feel

Fig. 1 Opening Kunsthalle for Music on Thursday 25 January 2018 at Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam. Photographer: Nieuwe Beelden Makers.

Fig. 2 Opening Kunsthalle for Music on Thursday 25 January 2018 at Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam. Photographer: Nieuwe Beelden Makers.

"informal" as—contrary to the standard concert situation—visitors could enter and leave freely during the duration of the performance and walk around unimpededly as performances were ongoing.

The scare quotes embracing the word "informal" are necessary here: the experience of informality in the *Kunsthalle* was not so much the result of a fusion of music with everyday life—a fusion that, as a perhaps caricatural version of the avant-garde would have it, would render music formless to the point of becoming unrecognizable. Rather, it was a more or less logical consequence of the fact that most visitors, presumably, were not (yet) accustomed to finding live music being performed in institutional contexts commonly reserved for contemporary art—institutions that we associate with certain experiential and attentional forms, and certain modes of reception. What occurred here was not a de-institutionalization of music, but rather its transposition from one institutional context to another. In other words, music was extrapolated from its usual, traditional framework, and thereby, to some extent, temporarily rescued from some of the reifications that this institutional framework brings about. At the same time, however, it was also subjected immediately to a *different* set of institutional codes and conditions—those of the contemporary art world—not at least because these codes and conditions are embodied and internalized by the visitors of Witte de With, who entered the premises carrying with them a specific set of institutional habits.[5] In that respect, it was telling that the *Kunsthalle for Music* could also be visited during Witte de With's regular opening times, when no live performances were taking place. First and foremost, visitors then encountered—apart from a number of musical instruments, some musical paraphernalia, and a small number of artworks and wall labels—the radiant emptiness of the white cube itself. And indeed, it was this dispositif that was made to shine with the promise of emancipating music from the institutional reifications with which it has arguably become all too merged.

Such a promise is to be taken seriously, but also with a grain of salt. An illuminating historical analogy is offered here by the so-called documentary turn in art that, in a not too distant past, sought to do away with some of the conventions crusted into the genre of documentary film, and to do so specifically by moving film away from cinema, and into the art world.[6] The documentary turn effectively amounted to an explosion of interesting work that approached documentary film-making in a new way. Yet, it also demonstrated the speed and ease with which the contemporary art world absorbs the shocks of the new—shocks which in fact keep its machinery running. Moreover, this analogy with the documentary turn is valuable because, in the case of the documentary turn, too, it was specifically the temporal structure of the museum experience that was credited with a certain emancipatory potential. As the visitor could move around freely through the exhibition space, it was no longer exclusively the duration of video works that determined the duration of reception.[7] Another, still more recent point of reference could be the surge of experimentation with dance performances in visual art institutions.[8] In these cases, as in the Kunsthalle, the individual museum-going subject's power to determine the duration of their own processes of attentive contemplation is pitted against the traditional immobilization of audiences and spectators in concert halls, theatres, and cinemas, where the time of reception is carefully administered. This is an operation that will succeed at catching exhibition-goers off guard for as long as they remain unaccustomed to these newly proposed modalities of reception, but a revolutionization (of documentary film, of dance, of music) it is not—nor, we might perhaps add, does it need to be.

Kunsthalle for Music's informality, as well as its intended problematization of the "ontology" of music, consisted first and foremost of music's subjection to the diffuse and scattered forms of reception normally reserved for visual art.[9] And indeed, this move did result in an a-typical, "fresh" musical experience. In that sense, this undertaking can be considered a generative experiment with strategies of reframing and recontextualization—in particular, with what has been called here the institutional transposition of music. At the same time, one does not need to adhere to an obstinate and conservative cultural

pessimism to see that it also effects a certain loss, a certain impoverishment of musical experience. It is true that the institutional *dispositif* of the *Kunsthalle for Music* did not impose the rigid, passive, and petrified form of contemplation still commonly associated with "high" culture in the same way as, for example, a classical concert set-up does. An important point, however, is that it is precisely this "informality" that makes the *Kunsthalle* (and the white cube in general) the institutional format most conveniently in synch with our 21st-century attention economy, characterized as it is by an abundance of content (text, image, sound, information) and a relative scarcity of our human attentive capacities—our potential to stay interested, to process, and ultimately to care.[10] Everyone who visits art exhibitions regularly will be well-familiar with the blasé attitudes they can often foster, and is therefore likely to be skeptical about the supposed emancipatory potential of the museum or exhibition space for music.[11] Nonetheless, it will prove fruitful here not to settle on any final conclusions—let alone judgments—on the project quite yet, and to instead move on to a discussion of an exhibition that was in many respects dissimilar and dissonant to the *Kunsthalle for Music*, yet was underpinned by some of the same concerns and engaged in a related experimentation with the duration of reception, with the "freedom" and sovereignty of the exhibition-goer, and with questions of attentiveness and distraction.

w serves imperialism

w serves imperialism was on view at W139, an artist-run project space in Amsterdam, from December 15, 2017, till January 21, 2018. Conceived and curated by W139 members and artists André Avelãs and Anami Schrijvers, it featured sound, video, installation, and music pieces by Avelãs himself, James Beckett, Cornelius Cardew, Nicolas Collins, DNK-Ensemble, Gijs Gieskens, Experimental Jetset, Joseph Kudirka, Brian McKenna, Jonathan Mikkelsen, Koen Nutters, Mike Ottink, Tristan Perich, Gert-Jan Prins, Natalia Domínguez Rangel, Paulo Raposo, Jasna Veličković, and Bas van Koolwijk. None of these pieces hinged on an element of live performance, nor were they, in

Fig. 3 Opening of w serves imperialism, Friday 15 December 2017 at W139, Amsterdam, with an "opening-specific" audiovisual installation by Jonathan Mikkelsen. Photographer: Chun-Han Chiang.

and of themselves, pieces of music: most were installations, mobiles, or video works in which the sound component was particularly pertinent.[12] Much like *Kunsthalle for Music*, the exhibition looked to the avant-garde for inspiration, albeit a somewhat different avant-garde. While Ari Benjamin Meyers referred to (neo-)avant-garde musical practices more generally, the makers of *w serves imperialism* looked specifically to the aforementioned figure of Cornelius Cardew. A composer initially influenced strongly by Cage, Cardew pioneered musical experiments with noise and improvisation before becoming increasingly involved with Marxist-Leninist politics. These political inclinations would quickly lead him to not only give up composing avant-garde or experimental music, but also to condemn it as elitist. He started composing in a more accessible idiom, often drawing on folk and popular music and writing in the service of the party. He

Fig. 4 Installation view of *w serves imperialism*, 16 December 2017 – 21 January 2018 at W139, Amsterdam, with: Paulo Raposo, Three Wind Drawings (Part IV of _Chronomatopeias Series_), 2017. Photographer: Chun-Han Chiang.

denounced the musical avant-garde as well as his prior engagements with it in his scathing book *Stockhausen Serves Imperialism*—the source for the title of the W139 exhibition.[13]

In *Kunsthalle for Music*, issues relating to the temporal structure of the exhibition experience and its implication in the attention economy were ever-present yet nowhere explicit; they served as the background against which the insertion of music in the exhibition space could stand out as novel and singular. By contrast, *w serves imperialism* was emphatic about bringing these issues to the fore. The accompanying exhibition text made clear reference to the attention economy and its ramifications for how we experience art and exhibitions: "The current state of media consumption renders us subjects of a sinister attention economy, making multitasking and superficial scrolling norms. This is the manner in which we often move through exhibitions as well, supposedly browsing art with a mere 9 seconds dedicated per artwork. With *w serves imperialism*, we seek an antithesis, a conceptual approach of curating conscious and qualitative art experiences that provides the time and space to engage in-depth."[14]

This antithetical proposition vis-à-vis the attention economy was nothing if not radical. The exhibition's visitors would enter W139's exhibition hall through a black curtain, to find the entire space shrouded in a pitch-black and disorienting darkness. Though no wall texts were present to warn visitors about what to expect, the exhibition's structure would reveal itself soon enough. Essentially, the various artworks in *w serves imperialism* were subsumed into one single installation, a unified *Gesamtkunstwerk* that employed an intricate technical system to illuminate and activate the works in the show: when a given work was lit and operative, all others would be utterly invisible and mute. The various pieces in the exhibition, therefore, could only be experienced one by one, in the order mandated by the exhibition itself. They were not always shown in the exact same sequence, though, and sometimes a specific work was turned on more than once in one exhibition "cycle". Thus, the duration of reception here was dictated by the exhibition structure rather than by the visitors themselves. This was the case not only for the individual artworks, but also for the exhibition as a whole—which took about 1,5 hours to consume, if one wanted to see every work at least once. Though not at all unpleasant, the experience of visiting *w serves imperialism* was one of giving up control and submitting oneself entirely to the exhibition's *dispositif*, to its carefully composed program of stimuli. In its use of shock tactics as well as of subtlety, this program was extreme: some works were deafening, others barely made a whisper; certain pieces would form a stroboscopic attack on visitors' eyesight—severely sensitized by the obscurity of the exhibition space—while some were so scantly lit that they were hard to even locate in the darkness. Needless to say, this was a firm curatorial setup if ever there was one: not only did it impose a specific rhythmic pattern of reception on its visitors, but it required that the participating artists had to agree to an exhibition format in which their work would in fact be invisible and inaudible for most of the time. In Leninist politics such as Cardew's, liberation and emancipation are to be achieved by giving oneself over to the programmatic stringency of the party, effacing one's individual desires and particularities to better meet the exigencies of the revolutionary horizon. Somewhat analogously, the proposition of *w serves imperialism* was that subsumption into the machine-like and rather relentless apparatus of this total installation, while suspending the sovereignty of the exhibition-goer to control the time of contemplation, would ultimately enable a deeper, more qualitative attentive engagement with art.

In several ways, then, *w serves imperialism* functions as a perfect counterpoint to *Kunsthalle for Music*. Where musical performances in the first exhibition reveled in the brightness of the white cube—a luminosity that has always functioned ideologically as a cipher for a certain faith in the public sphere, for transparency, and ultimately for Enlightenment itself—the second created what Noam Elcott has termed artificial darkness, establishing an affinity with the experiential forms associated with cinema and the theatre or concert hall, rather than with traditional exhibition spaces.[15] While *Kunsthalle* visitors

roamed freely through the exhibition space, their itinerary through *w serves imperialism* was largely predetermined. While the former exhibition was predicated on notions of informality, improvisation, and play, the latter mounted a highly rigid structure. The scattered, distributed distraction of the *Kunsthalle* diametrically opposed *w serves imperialism*'s commanding centralization and concentration of attention. Simultaneity in the *Kunsthalle* became sequence in *w serves imperialism*; chaos became order. Ultimately, they were two very different but complementary institutional transpositions: whereas the *Kunsthalle* kept the attentional modality of the exhibition space intact, seeking to explore how music would function and transform under its conditions, *w serves imperialism* was ultimately more invested in challenging and overhauling those conditions, with the quintessentially temporal and durational nature of music serving as a model for doing so. Even though visitors could of course still leave the exhibition at any given point, or just roam through the darkness as they desired, disregarding the switching-on and switching-off of works, it is possible to assert that *w serves imperialism*, in bargaining away some of the viewers' autonomy over the time of reception, began to move away from the institutional framework of the art exhibition, toward that of the concert. Though the exhibition contained no musical pieces—at least not in any conventional sense—its arrangement was musical in that it aligned the duration of successive pieces with the attention paid by its visitors.[16] While the *Kunsthalle* set out to demonstrate that music is not necessarily what we think it is precisely by moving away from the concert setting and inserting music into an art institutional context, in *w serves imperialism* it was the institutional context itself that was transfigured through music. It is in this sense that the exhibition was radical: it challenged certain deep-rooted presuppositions of what an exhibition is, and of what forms of experience it affords. It did so specifically by tampering with the freedom visitors are accustomed to having over their time in the exhibition space, and with the distracted reception this freedom more often than not results in.

On an imagined spectrum of attentive modalities, from hyper-

distracted to hyperconcentrated, these two exhibitions would have to be situated at opposite ends. However, simply presenting them as antithetical and contradictory to one another would ultimately be reductive. In their ways of organizing duration and attention, the *Kunsthalle* and *w serves imperialism* present diverging responses to the attention economy and the challenges it poses for cultural experience. It is important to grasp both responses at once, and *dialectically*, as both have their own merits as well as their shortcomings when it comes to facing those challenges. Clearly, the issue with the former is that it rather uncritically employs the institutional frame of the exhibition as an instrument for emancipating music and musical experience, neglecting this institutional frame's increasing entanglement with the attention economy altogether. With the latter, which does explicitly address issues of attentiveness, the trouble is not so much with its "authoritarian" tendencies (lest we forget that authoritarian exhibition concepts are still a far stretch from authoritarian states) as with its cursory acceptance of the presumption that "conscious and qualitative art experiences" and "in-depth" engagements are intrinsically desirable or superior. As even a quick glance at Benjamin's Artwork essay reveals, such a presumption—though admittedly it acquires new implications under the attention economy—is not without its ideological and arguably elitist connotations. Furthermore, keeping the dialectical tension between these two shows in suspension proves helpful in avoiding overly schematic or totalizing understandings of the attention economy (and the ubiquitous and tiresome complaints concerning the supposedly microscopic attention spans of "millenials" certainly demonstrate how tempting such simplifications are), or of what an appropriate rejoinder to it might entail in the field of culture.

Finally, it should be made explicit that throughout this account, questions of control and sovereignty over the time of spectatorship have figured metonymically for struggles over time in general, and therefore ultimately for politics itself. Different attentive modalities, from the dispersed to the concentrated, have been correlative to different political forms, from the molecular revolutions of individual

liberation to the regimented organization of party politics. When it comes to these political forms, too, apprehending seeming opposites dialectically seems more productive than seeing them as mutually exclusive of each other. It can be a way of keeping things open, of keeping things productively and pleasantly messy.

Author

Steyn Bergs is an art critic and a researcher. Currently, he is conducting his PhD research on the commodification of digital artworks at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. From 2016 to 2018, together with Rosa te Velde, he was co-editor-in-chief of Kunstlicht, a journal for visual art, visual culture, and architecture. His writing has appeared in various magazines and journals.

Comments

1 See, for instance, Liz Kotz, Post-Cagean Aesthetics and the "Event" Score", in: October, Vol. 95, Winter 2001, pp. 54 – 89.

2 Peter Bürger, Theory of the Avant-Garde, Minneapolis 1984, p. 24 – 25.

3 This de-institutionalization designates not just an escape from (established) art institutions, but rather the withering of art itself as an institution. Bürger distinguished between the historical avant-gardes (essentially Futurism, Dadaism, and Surrealism) and the neo-avant-garde of the late 1960s and early 1970s, famously critiquing the latter for offering not more than an immanent critique of the institution of art. For an equally famous riposte to Bürger, see: Hal Foster, Who's Afraid of the Neo-Avant-Garde?, in: Hal Foster, The Return of the Real, Cambridge, MA 1996, p. 1 – 34.

4 This is also how Witte de With itself operates. Like most Kunsthalles, Witte de With is a not-for-profit (and publicly funded) institution.

5 The use of "institutional habits" here is inspired by, but not identical to, Sara Ahmed's work on the subject. Sara Ahmed, Institutional Habits, in: feministkilljoys, February 2, 2015. URL: https://feministkilljoys.com/2015/02/02/institutional-habits/ [06.05.2018].

6 Erika Balsom/Hila Peleg, Introduction: The Documentary Attitude, in: Erika Balson/Hila Peleg (eds.), Documentary Across Disciplines, Cambridge, MA 2016, p. 10 – 19 (16).

7 Boris Groys, From Image to File – And Back: Art in the Age of Digitalization, in: Boris Groys, Art Power, Cambridge, MA 2008, p. 83 – 91 (88).

8 On the temporal economies of dance and performance exhibitions, see: Sven Lütticken, Dance Factory, in: Mousse, No. 50, October 2015, p. 90 – 103.

9 Note how the contemporary museum or exhibition experience in this sense approximates what Walter Benjamin famously theorized, in the artwork essay, as "reception in distraction." However, habituation to reception in distraction was modeled by Benjamin after the experience of architecture and popular media such as film, and was to serve as an antidote for the attentive model of immersive contemplation that Benjamin associated with (the ideology of) high art. Walter Benjamin, The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version, in: Michael W. Jennings/Brigid Doherty/Thomas Y. Levin (eds.), The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media, Cambridge MA 2008, p. 40 – 41.

10 Tiziana Terranova, Attention, Economy and the Brain, in: Culture Machine, Vol. 13, 2012. p. 1 – 19. Somewhat more recently, we have seen several calls for a more conscious cultivation of human attentive capacities in the face of the digital attention economy, such as Isabelle Stengers' "art of paying attention" and Yves Citton's ecological understanding of attention. Isabelle Stengers, In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism, Lüneburg 2015, p. 61 – 62. Yves Citton, The Ecology of Attention, Cambridge 2017.

11 The evocation of "blasé attitudes" here serves not at all to pass a judgment on the supposed snobbishness of exhibition-goers. Rather, in accordance with Simmel's exploration of the term, it is intended as a more or less neutral description of the defensive responses subjects develop in the face of overstimulation. Georg Simmel,

The Metropolis and Mental Life, in: Gary Bridge/Sophie Watson (eds.), The Blackwell City Reader, Oxford and Malden, MA, 2002, p. 11 – 19 (14).

12 Several events were organized within the framework of w serves imperialism that did include live performance, but these are sidelined here so as to keep focus strictly on the exhibition itself.

13 For more on Cardew, see: Virginia Anderson, Cornelius Cardew lives, in: openDemocracy, December 12, 2011. URL: https://www.opendemocracy.net/arts-Music/cardew_3509.jsp [06.05.2018].

14 W139, w serves imperialism, in: W139, s.d. URL: http://w139.nl/en/article/25152/w-serves-imperialism/ [06.05.2018].

15 Elcott traces the history of the specifically modern dispositif of artificial darkness – "a technology of visibility and invisibility" – from Wagner's musical dramas to the cinema and avant-garde movements of the early 20th century. His descriptions of it, however, fit w serves imperialism seamlessly. Noam Elcott, Artificial Darkness: An Obscure History of Modern Art and Media, Chicago/London 2016, p. 11.

16 One important difference, however, is that in the case of a musical concert or programme, duration is proper to the musical pieces themselves, whereas the duration of the singular pieces in w serves imperialism did not always have an intrinsic link to the qualities of the artworks themselves but was determined by the exhibition's overarching structure, and thus by the curators.